

Contributions from the Australian Museum.

THE "WIDOW'S CAP" OF THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES.

BY R. ETHERIDGE, JUNR., CURATOR OF THE AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM.

(Plates xxvi.-xxxi.)

By no means one of the least interesting of the Mortuary Customs of the Australian Aborigines is the addition of white or black pigment to some part of the person of the mourner. One or other of these colours, but black only to a limited extent, was, and even is still in the more remote parts of the Continent applied either to the head, face, beard, chest or arms alone, or to a combination of any two or more of them. The most conspicuous of all is, without doubt, the head-covering known as the "Widow's Cap." "Mourning," says the Rev. J. Bulmer,* of the Aboriginal Mission Station at Lake Tyers, Gippsland, is, amongst the tribes of the Murray River, "a very laborious affair for the widows, as they had to make themselves caps of plaster for a long time after the death."

One of the first, if not actually the first, travellers to notice these peculiar coverings was Surveyor-General Mitchell during his "Second Expedition into the Interior of Eastern Australia" in 1835, on graves near Fort Bourke, Darling River, accompanied by white lenticular balls. He informs† us that beside the latter "were in some cases casts also in lime or gypsum of the upper part of the head, which had evidently been worn on a head where

* Journ. R. Geogr. Soc. Australasia (Vict. Branch), 1888, v., Pt. 1, p. 22.

† Three Expeds. Int. E. Australia, 1838, i. p. 252, figs.

the hair had been confined with a net, of which the impression and some hairs remained behind." During his "Third Expedition" in 1836, Sir Thomas again met with these caps near the confluence of the Murray and Darling Rivers, and speaking of the graves there says,* "On them lay the same singular casts of the head, which we had seen only at Fort Bourke." Confirmation of these statements was afforded by Governor E. J. Eyre, for many years Protector of the Aborigines in South Australia, who found† the practice a common one amongst the natives along the Murray River, at the same time remarking that the coverings were moulded to the women's heads over a piece of net-work. The explanation given by Mitchell and Eyre became perfectly intelligible on the appearance of Mr. G. F. Angas' beautiful work on S. Australia,‡ wherein a woman is depicted attired in a widow's cap, and otherwise whitened.

I have been favoured by Sir Joseph Abbott with the loan of a very excellent specimen of these head coverings. Mr. Charles Kilgour has presented to the Trustees another remarkable example, and with the aid of a third already in the Australian Museum I have been able to compile the following notes.

Sir Joseph Abbott's specimen (Plates xxvi.-xxvii.) is of an oval shape, ten inches long, eight inches wide, and five and a half inches high, the concave interior having a depth of four and a quarter inches, thus giving to the material of the crown a solid thickness of one and a quarter inches. The cap may be described in general terms as dish-cover-shaped, with the edges scarcely curved inwards, and wider at one end than at the other; the former I take to be the posterior. The exterior is comparatively smooth. At two inches from the narrow or anterior end, the opening is four and a quarter inches wide, and at the same distance from the posterior end the transverse measurement of the opening is five and a half inches, the length of the entire aperture

* *Ibid.*, ii. p. 112.

† Journ. Exped. Discovery in Central Australia, 1845, ii. p. 354, pl.

‡ S. Australia Illustrated, 1846, pl. 51, f. 20.

being seven and a quarter inches. The impression of the net, placed on the wearer's head previous to the operation of plastering, is beautifully preserved, and presents on an enlarged scale the engine-turned appearance of a watch-case cover, the thread impressions radiating from a vertex. The latter is nearer the anterior than the posterior end, three and a half inches from the front edge of the opening. The impressions of the radiating strings of the net are broad and deep, showing that a very coarse string was used in the manufacture of the latter; the mesh is rhomboidal and large. From the colour still remaining in the net impression, it is evident that the cap had been removed from a red sandy deposit. The weight is 7 lbs. $7\frac{1}{2}$ ozs.

The cap presented to the Museum by Mr. C. Kilgour (Plates xxviii.-xxix.) is conical, decreasing to an obtuse apex that is eccentric both longitudinally and transversely; it is more posterior than anterior in position. The length is eight inches, width seven and a quarter inches, and the height seven inches. The length of the head cavity is seven and a half inches, the general width six and a quarter, being slightly wider at the posterior than the anterior end, the depth four inches, thus allowing a thickness of three inches to the plaster in the crown, and is the most solid at that point of the three examples; the margin is broken, but so far as preserved there is no sign of the incurving of the edge seen in Sir Joseph Abbott's specimen, and still more marked in that remaining to be described. The interior of the crown is rather flattened, but the vertex of the net is not preserved. The impression of the net-mesh, on the other hand, is so, the ribbing of the net being simply radiate, not after the engine-turned pattern, the resulting mesh-holes being square. The grooves left by the net, as in the case of the first specimen, retain particles of a red sandy clay. The weight of this cap is 4 lbs. $8\frac{1}{2}$ ozs.

The third, or Museum specimen (Plates xxx.-xxx.), is the least well preserved, exhibiting evidence of lateral pressure when in a plastic condition. It is a long-oval in outline and depressed. The length is eleven and a half inches, in width seven and a half inches, and in total height five and a half inches. The margin

of the head aperture is much incurved from pressure, particularly at the sides, the width in consequence is ill-defined. The length of the aperture is nine and a half inches, and depth of the interior three and a half, allowing two inches for the thickness of the crown. The impression of the net, only partially preserved, exhibits a large rhomboidal mesh for which a coarse string had been used. In places the impressions of the latter are filled with actual casts of the string employed. This cap cannot be looked upon as a typical example by any means, from causes already explained. The weight is 7 lbs. 14 ozs.

Sir Joseph Abbott's cap is from Dunlop Holding, near Louth, Darling River.

Mr. Kilgour's specimen was found on the west bank of the Darling River, about twenty-two miles above Wilcannia, on the Mount Murchison Holding, on a sand-drift within fifty yards of high water mark (? flood mark).

The Museum example is from Rufus Creek, Lake Victoria, Murray River, N. S. Wales.

The name of these strange head-coverings no doubt differed according to tribe, and was as varied as that of most other articles used by the Aborigines. Eyre calls them *Korno*;* by Angas they are simply referred to† as "Widows' Caps," whilst Bulmer states‡ that in the Kulnine Tribe [? Kulkynne Tribe, Murray R., Co. Karkarooc, Victoria] they were called *Kopi*.

Sir Joseph Abbott's specimen may, I think, be accepted as a fairly good example of the form generally adopted. One of Angas' figures§ exhibits a cap with a good convexity of crown and a longitudinally elongated form, and the two figures|| given by Mr. E. M. Curr are of a similar shape. The outline assumed by Mr. Kilgour's specimen is probably exceptional.

As a rule the caps were assumed by widows as a token of grief for the loss of a husband, but amongst the Darling River Tribes

* Journ. Exped. Discovery in Central Australia, 1845, ii. Expl. pl. 1, f. 17.

† S. Australia Illustrated, 1846, Expl. pl. 30, f. 15.

‡ *Fide* Curr, Australian Race, 1886, ii. p. 238.

§ *Loc. cit.* pl. 30, f. 15.

|| Australian Race, 1886, ii. pl. opp. p. 238.

the nearest female relative, other than the widow, assumed one, according to Mr. J. Bonney.* I have only met with one recorded instance of a cap being worn by a man. Mr. J. Hawdon† during a "Journey from N.S. Wales to Adelaide in 1838" met with a man in the neighbourhood of the Goulburn River, in Victoria, whose "head was plastered with a coat of white clay, which is the mode in which these tribes wear mourning for their dead."

The preparation of the head to receive the cap appears to have been practically the same throughout the tribes wearing it. Angas informs‡ us that along the Murray the head to be covered is first shaven and then enclosed in a net; Bonney, referring§ to the Darling Aborigines, says, "fixed to the head by the hair and a small net, which is generally laid over the head before the cake is plastered on," and at Lake Bonney, or Nookamka, on the Murray River, Hawdon|| observed a "network made of twine." Bulmer,¶ again, says of certain of the Murray Tribes, "In order to get the cap properly fitted to the head the woman had all her hair cut off, a net was put over the head, which enabled her to get the cap off easily." On the other hand, in certain Victorian tribes, but not specially named, singeing appears to have been resorted to, for Mr. W. Stanbridge remarks,** "Widows in some instances have the hair first cut off with a little fire stick close to the head, by the doctor or priest, before assuming the badge of woe."

Whether or no the actual operation of covering the head was always performed on her own head by the widow herself seems

* Journ. Anthropol. Inst., 1884, xiii. p. 135.

† Proc. R. Geogr. Soc. Austr. (N.S.W. Br.), 1891, v. No. 2, p. 36.

‡ S. Australia Illustrated, 1846, Expl. pl. 30, f. 15.

§ Journ. Anthropol. Inst., 1884, xiii. p. 135.

|| *Loc. cit.* p. 36.

¶ Journ. R. Geogr. Soc. Austr. (Vict. Br.), 1888, v. Pt. 1, p. 23.

**Trans. Eth. Soc., 1861, i. p. 298; Smyth, Aborigines of Victoria, 1878, i. p. 111.

doubtful, for according to the late Mr. T. Worsnop, of Adelaide,* the widow's head is plastered by female relatives of deceased.

The period of retention varied according to tribe. Bulmer mentions† a few days only, and speaks of renewal, but Worsnop is more explicit, assigning six months as the period of mourning. The Rev. R. W. Holden reports‡ that in the Marowera Tribe, at the junction of the Rivers Darling and Murray, the period of retention is twelve months. At any rate, the cap appears to have been generally retained for a lengthened period.

Other parts of the body besides the head were whitened by the cap-bearers. A figure§ of a woman in mourning, by Angas, exhibits in addition a whitened forehead and left side of the face, a streak across the upper lip, around the nose and chin, whitened breast, and a patch on the top of the upper left arm. This figure has been several times copied by authors. The supplementary plastering seems to have been wide spread, for Mr. F. Bonney informs|| us, amongst other writers, that the women of certain of the Darling River tribes smeared themselves over both the face and body.

The inconvenience caused by these caps, if from no other point of view than that of weight, must have been great, for it has been remarked¶ that "the poor woman generally complained of pain in the head during her mourning, but fashion must be followed at all risks." So completely was the head covered that of some of the Murray Natives Krefft says,** "the deeper they mourn, the more gypsum is laid on, so that sometimes nothing but the eyes, nose, and mouth remain uncovered." The actual weights recorded are as follows:—Eyre gives†† the weight of a

* Prehistoric Arts, 3rd Edit., 1897, p. 62.

† Journ. R. Geogr. Soc. Austr. (Vict. Br.), 1888, v. Pt. 1, p. 23.

‡ Taplin's Folklore, 1879, p. 27.

§ S. Australia Illustrated, 1846, pl. 51, f. 20.

|| Journ. Anthropol. Inst., 1884, xiii. p. 135.

¶ Bulmer, Journ. R. Geogr. Soc. Austr. (Vict. Br.), 1888, v. Pt. 1, p. 23.

** Trans. Phil. Soc. N.S. Wales, 1862-65 [1866], p. 373.

†† Journ. Exped. Discovery in Central Australia, 1845, ii. p. 354

Lower Murray cap as $8\frac{1}{2}$ lbs.; Bulmer records* one from the Murray-Darling country as "14 lbs. after it was dry"; according to E. M. Curr,† two examples from Yelta. Darling-Murray Junction, weighed respectively 10 lbs. 7 ozs., and 5 lbs. 13 ozs.; and Worsnop has placed on record‡ one a little over 12 lbs., one 13 lbs., and another 14 lbs. The extraordinary weight of 30 lbs. mentioned by the Rev. R. W. Holden§ in the Marowera or Murray-Darling Junction Tribe must be an oversight. No woman could carry this for twelve months as he states. The weights of those now exhibited have already been given.

Little attention has been paid to the sizes of these caps, those who had entered into such details contenting themselves with mentioning the thickness of the coating only. Thus, Eyre mentions|| a thickness of two or three inches, and Angas says¶ nearly two inches thick. From the measurements given on a previous page, we may conclude that the material used varied in the crown of the cap from one and a quarter to three and a half inches.

The ultimate destination of the coverings was always the grave.** We have seen that it was reposing on such that Mitchell first found them, and we have similar evidence that a like disposal was practised by several other tribes, extending over a wide area. Police-trooper Ewens, of Blanchtown, S. Australia,†† says of the Moorundee Tribe, inhabiting the Murray River, from Mannum to Overland Corner, "when a man dies women wear clay on their heads and place it, when dry, in the shape of a basin on the grave." Corporal Shaw, of Overland Corner, S. Australia, relates‡‡

* Journ. R. Geogr. Soc. Austr. (Vict. Br.), 1888, v. Pt. 1, p. 23.

† Australian Race, 1886, ii. p. 238.

‡ Prehistoric Arts, 3rd Edit., 1897, p. 63.

§ Taplin's Folklore, 1879, p. 27.

|| *Loc. cit.* p. 354.

¶ S. Australia Illustrated, 1846, pl. 30, f. 15.

** Worsnop, Prehistoric Arts, 3rd Edit., 1897, p. 63.

†† Taplin's Folklore, 1879, p. 30.

‡‡ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

of the Rankbirit Tribe, at that place, that the "relatives make a pipeclay paste and place it on the head, and wear it till quite hard, when it is placed on the grave." Bulmer supplements these statements by saying* that in some of the Murray Tribes "the woman proceeded to the grave and after lying at full length on it for some time, she would deposit the cap, after which another one had to be made." The same observer, according to E. M. Curr,† also adds the following interesting fact that in the Marowera Tribe, at the junction of the Murray and Darling Rivers, "after removal the cap was baked in the fire" before being laid on the grave.

From what I have been able to learn, this custom appears to have been common to the Aborigines inhabiting the Murray River Valley from near the mouth of the river to its junction with the Darling, thence up the latter certainly as far as Fort Bourke and possibly beyond. Returning to the junction, it is traceable along the Murray in N.S. Wales and Victoria, but how far it extended in that direction, there is not sufficient evidence to show.

In the preceding pages I have confined myself to a consideration of the "Widow's Cap" proper, but it was and is customary amongst tribes outside what may be termed the cap-bearing area to merely smear the head, or dress the hair, as well as other parts of the body with white pigment as a sign of mourning. The material so used in the Boulia District of West-Central Queensland by the Pitta-Pitta Tribe is called *Pa-ta*, or *Kopi*, and the mourner is called *Pa-ta-marō*, or "plaster-possessor."‡ In the Moorloobulloo Tribe, at the junction of King's Creek and the Georgina River, S.W. Queensland, it is again termed *Kopi*.§

The form this smearing or coating took was also varied. In the Boulia, Cloncurry, and Leichhardt-Selwyn Districts, amongst

* Journ. R. Geogr. Soc. Austr. (Vict. Br.), 1888, v. Pt. 1, p. 23.

† Australian Race, 1886, ii. p. 238.

‡ Roth, Ethnological Studies, 1897, p. 164.

§ J. O. Macarthur and J. S. Little in Curr, Australian Race, 1886, ii. p. 366.

the Pitta-Pitta, Mitakoodi and Kalkadoon Tribes respectively, the *Kopi* is put on in lumps, until the whole hair appears an irregular mass of this material.* In the Arunta Tribe, around Charlotte Waters, Central Australia, according to Dr. E. C. Stirling,† the hair is matted into coils with this white pigment. The widow is called *Inpirta*, or the “whitened one in reference to the pipeclay.”‡ The peculiar ceremonies in the Arunta Tribe, accompanying the putting on of this pipeclay, described by Prof. Baldwin Spencer and Mr. F. J. Gillen are well worth perusal. The adoption of this form of pigmentation in the Central Queensland Tribes appears to have been more universal in the community than the mere wearing of a cap by specially afflicted individuals, for Dr. W. E. Roth says§ that in the Boulia District it is adopted by all, “whether the deceased be man, woman, or child,” but is worn longer by a woman mourning for her husband.

This simpler form of an outward exhibition of grief extended quite into the south-east corner of the Continent, for Mr. R. Helms ascertained|| that the members of the Omeo Tribe in North Gippsland “smear pipeclay over their head as a sign of mourning.” This was “retained for some time, but as a rule much longer by the women than by the men.”

This assumption of white by the men is also an interesting point, not only on the head but on the beard also. The latter in the Arunta Tribe, at Charlotte Waters, is matted into coils with the pigment;¶ the same treatment of the hair in this tribe has already been mentioned. In the Koombokkaborra Tribe, on the main range between the Belyando and Cape Rivers, East-Central Queensland, “the women plaster the heads,”** presumed by

* Roth, *loc. cit.* pp. 164-166.

† Anthropology Horn Exped., 1896, p. 137.

‡ Spencer & Gillen, Native Tribes of C. Australia, 1899, p. 500.

§ Ethnological Studies, 1897, p. 164.

|| Proc. Linn. Soc. N.S. Wales, 1895, x. (2), p. 399.

¶ Stirling, Anthropology Horn Exped., 1896, p. 137.

** J. MacGlashan, in Curr, Australian Race, 1887, iii. p. 21.

themselves, but in the Nimbalda Tribe, around Mt. Freeling, in S. Australia, other members of the community, not necessarily relatives, "put a plaster on their head."* An analogous practice exists amongst the Antakaringas, near Charlotte Waters, the mourners in general, so says Mr. C. Giles,† smear their heads with white earth.

Precisely as in the case of the cap-wearers, so the head-plasterers also besmeared other parts of the body. The Aldolingas,‡ Aruntas,§ and Antakaringas|| placed white on their breasts; and the men of the first named a white bar over the forehead. In the Dieri Tribe, inhabiting the Cooper's Creek District, the women added two wide stripes on the arms.¶ Faces as well as heads were smeared in the Omeo Tribe in Gippsland.** The head plaster in its simpler form seems to have been retained longer than the more substantial cap, at any rate in some communities, for Roth states†† that the gin mourning for her husband in the Boulia District retained this outward and visible sign even up to six months. In the Antakaringas, on the other hand, the covering was occasionally renewed after the first month,‡‡ and ultimately placed on the grave, a practice we have already seen adopted in disposing of the caps.

The universality of this external method of displaying grief is particularly well exemplified by its extension into West Australia, where a very old writer§§ informs us it is the speciality

* Police-Trooper Smith, in Taplin, *Folklore*, 1879, p. 88.

† Taplin, *loc. cit.* p. 90.

‡ Kirchauß, *Journ. R. Geogr. Soc. Aust. (S.A. Br.)*, 1890 ii. p. 37.

§ Stirling, *Anthropology Horn Exped.*, 1896. p. 137.

|| C. Giles, in Taplin, *loc. cit.* p. 90.

¶ Worsnop, *Prehistoric Arts*, 3rd Edit., 1897, p. 62.

** Helms, *Proc. Linn. Soc. N.S. Wales*, 1895, x. (2), p. 399.

†† *Ethnological Studies*, 1897, p. 164.

‡‡ C. Giles, in Taplin, *Folklore*, 1879, p. 90.

§§ G. F. Moore, *Descrip. Vocab. Language Aborig. W. Australia*, 1842, p. 26.

of the women and was known as *Dardar*, and consisted of a streak of white across the forehead, down the sides of the cheeks, round the chin and each eye.

The material employed, whether as caps or head plasters only, displays a wonderful similarity of material over the entire Continent. Eyre,* speaking of the Murray tribes in general, calls it "carbonate of lime"; Angas† terms the material "pipe-clay"; a similar name is assigned to the pigment used by the Moorundee Tribe, from Mannum to Overland Corner, by Police-Trooper Ewens;‡ again by Corporal Shaw,§ in the Rankbirit Tribe, at Overland Corner; and white clay, or lime, in West Australia.|| Stanbridge describes¶ the material used by some of the Central Victorian Tribes as a "white-talcay clay"; "clay and ashes" in the Koombokkaburra Tribe,** between the Belyando and Cape Rivers; "white pigment" in the Arunta Tribe around Charlotte Waters††; and pipe clay in the Omeo District of Victoria.‡‡ Mr. F. Bonney§§ is much more explicit when speaking of the Darling River Tribes; here we meet with "white plaster made of calcined selenite or gypsum." In the Nimbaldra Tribe, around Mount Freeling, the same material is made use of;||| the Antakarngas at Charlotte Waters are said¶¶ to use both "gypsum and pipe clay." Of the Murray Tribes, two interesting accounts are

* Journ. Exped. Discovery in Central Australia, 1845, ii. p. 354.

† South Australia Illustrated, 1846, t. 30, f. 15.

‡ Taplin, Folklore, 1879, p. 30.

§ *Ibid.*, d. 29.

|| G. F. Moore, Descrip. Vocab. Language Aborig. W. Australia, 1842, p. 26.

¶ Trans. Ethnol. Soc., 1861, i. p. 298.

** J. MacGlashan, in Curr. Australian Race, 1887, iii. p. 21.

†† Stirling, Anthropology Horn Exped., 1896, p. 137.

‡‡ Helms, Proc. Linn. Soc. N.S. Wales, 1895, x. (2), p. 399.

§§ Journ. Anthropol. Inst., 1884, xiii. p. 135.

||| Police-Trooper Smith, in Taplin, Folklore, 1879, p. 88.

¶¶ C. Giles, *ibid.*, p. 90.



extant, for Mr. Bulmer states* that "they gathered kopice gypsum, which was very plentiful in the district; this they burnt in the fire, it was then made in a paste"; and at Lake Bonney, on the Murray, Hawdon remarks,† "we procured also a great number of singular sea shells and fossils embedded in the bank [of the river]. The natives who were with us told me they burned these shells in the fire and then made them into a plaster," with which they not only decorated themselves, but also made caps. Curr, on the testimony of Messrs. J. O. Macarthur and J. S. Little, says that the Moorloobulloo Tribe, at the junction of King's Creek with the Georgina River, plastered the head with wet gypsum, "which singularly enough is called *Kopi*, the name in use in the Marowera Tribe, which dwells at the junction of the Darling and Murray, 750 miles to the south-west, for those solid coverings of the head."‡ The word *Kopi* is also used in the Boulia District of West-Central Queensland, according to Roth,§ for a "sort of gypsum, which is first of all burnt, and subsequently immersed in a comparatively small quantity of water, so as to make a viscid mass which dries hard like plaster of Paris."

The use of white as a sign of mourning amongst ancient and aboriginal races might be enlarged on until it became unnecessarily wearisome, but one reference is worthy of note. Among the Andamanese,|| the relatives on the death of an adult smeared themselves with a wash of an olive-coloured clay called *Og*. After shaving their heads the men placed a lump of this clay, termed *del. a-*, on their foreheads, the women on the top of the head, "where it hardens and is left, much to the individual discomfort, until the expiration of the days of mourning;" should it fall off in the meantime, it is renewed.

* Journ. R. Geogr. Soc. Austr. (Vict. Br.), 1888, v. Pt. 1, p. 22.

† *Ibid.* (N.S. Wales Br.), 1891, v. No. 2, p. 56.

‡ Australian Race, 1886, ii. p. 366.

§ Ethnological Studies, 1897, p. 110.

|| E. H. Man, Journ. Anthropol. Inst., 1883, xii. pp. 141, 143.

